

Galway Arts Festival 2009

Lúc Verling is a writer and publisher based in Dublin.

Galway Arts Festival, over the thirty-two years of its existence, has evolved to become part of the fabric of its bustling host city, while simultaneously elevating the city's stature in the art world internationally.

Of a previous *GAF* a *Guardian* reviewer wrote, "I've rarely encountered a better curated festival or one that more exhilaratingly mixed the local and the international." This year its mix of international (Hockney, Absolut Art, Laumann), transitional (Kingerlee, Minihan, Shavrova) and local artists (Brady, Lyne) embrace of local commercial galleries and non-art spaces, and breadth of address from abstracts (Ger Sweeney) to audience-participative works (Mart), represented and catered to a broad spectrum of interests well beyond the western hub's city boundaries.

All the exhibitions (to say nothing of the other festival events) were under the directorship of one man, the reticent Artistic Director Paul Fahy, who gave few clues in the exhibitions' limited literature of the aesthetics or logic which informed his curation of the shows.

The visual-arts programme of the festival has been steadily prioritised over the past number of years, with no fewer than sixteen exhibitions included this year – a remarkable achievement given that the exhibitions were presented in a city lacking any municipal art space, and more extraordinary in light of the present economic

climate, since the visual-arts programme generates no box-office revenue for a festival whose growth is fuelled with income from that quarter.

Fortunately, if not uncontroversially, Absolut Vodka stepped in this year to become the first corporation in the history of the festival to sponsor the entire visual-arts programme, the Absolut campaign of course intentionally probing conceptual or perceived borders between advertising and art, and happily raising the old chestnut ‘but is it art?’

Within the sixteen shows in the Absolut visual-arts programme was a stand-alone exhibition of Absolut works that had product so obviously placed as to work as ad posters (though they weren’t all commissioned as ad posters) rather than artworks. The exceptions were Francesco Clemente’s, a watercolour of a generic bottle between a pair of arms that was previously exhibited in one of his own shows, and Linn Fernström’s self-portrait, with a cradled severed head in one arm and an Absolut bottle with a flower in the other.

One of two Kenny Scharf paintings was dubbed ‘controversial’ in the Absolut Art catalogue as it represented spirits of drunkenness emerging from the iconic bottle, but a notional prize for creating an Absolut art world within an Absolut art world would go to Miquel Barceló, whose mixed-media painting quoted other Absolut artworks, even works in the Galway exhibition, by Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf.

More controversial in every way, at least for this viewer, who must own up to having invigilated at the exhibition, was the work of five photojournalists on a *Child soldier*

theme. What the intention was in showing this body of visual *reportage* remains obscure, as there was no catalogue or statement accompanying the show and the limited literature (desk copy only) provided little insight into the motivations behind it.

Child soldiery is of course scandalising, and naturally is an issue that needs to be raised in public awareness. Not, however, in this manner. Not as a series of photo-essays without the essays, nor as a disjointed series of images of kids with guns in Nepal, Palestine and Africa.

If it had been staged by a charity such as War Child or Zest for Kids, then it might have made some sense, and provided a focus for the pity and fear the sometimes shocking images induced. This focus, however, was absent. Instead *Child soldier* induced mere hand-wringing about Africa and the Developing World. Without providing an historical or geopolitical context for the phenomenon of child soldiery, what emerged from *Child soldier*, at least for me, was a reinforcement of the realisation that Africa remains our theatre of suffering, our pity and fear, and our catharsis. With shows like this it seems destined to remain a non-historicised tragedy wherein the fates are to blame for human anguish and where intervention is futile.

Nor was there any suggested interrogation of the photographic medium or how it might qualify under the circumstances as art. On the other hand, an exhibition like the artists' collective Mart's *Open door policy* benefitted from the art director's seeming *laissez faire* attitude. Mart's open-submission, site-specific show was allowed develop

the collective's ethos of participatory art and, anecdotally, at least one little girl from the community returned to the exhibition with a drawing of her own for inclusion.

Fahy's latitude in embracing this Irish-based but internationalist art-students' initiative allowed visitors identify contested public/ private territories in Galway and engage its community locale on Henry and Dominic Streets on many levels with video, performance, installation, audio and process artworks, reaching out beyond the boundaries of traditional art practice, audience and modes of reception, and generating one of *GAF 09*'s stand-out shows.

Local artist Lisa Sweeney's *Magpie's attic* body of new works had to contend with other artists' sculptures and paintings in the window ledges and halls of the gallery where her mixed-media exhibits were on show, distracting the viewer from apprehending uninterrupted the layers of meaning, language of symbols, and personal issues surfacing to engage her or him in the artist's private world. Sweeney's works' juxtaposition of the pulchritudinous with the abject, in works that were equally forceful and subtle, deserved better. As did John Minihan's photographic portraits of Samuel Beckett and Francis Bacon, which were hung, as if by after-thought, on unplastered concrete-block walls outside the gallery proper at Kenny's.

In our as-yet predominantly literary culture, viewers need literature – brief CVs, artists' statements, excerpts from reviews or endorsements, introductory essays – in exhibitions for orientation. This literature was generally lacking at *GAF*.

More than the sum of its parts, *GAF* is making a significant contribution to local and national visual-arts culture, if not also to the international visual arts. Part of its effectiveness is due to the artistic director's hands-off policy towards the shows, refusing to homogenise them into a single vision through the introduction of a stated, procrustean rationale. However, the visual-arts programme, I believe, would benefit by the director asserting more authority, presence and 'ownership' of the shows, generating more written information from the artists and creatives, without diminishing the ethos of allowing each show discretely breathe and present on its own terms its challenges, attacks and talking-points.

Lisa Sweeney "Time", 21x28x15xm, wood, pheasant wings & clock.

Lisa Sweeney "Cage", 53.5x56xcm, mixed media on board.

Lisa Sweeney "Micheáls Birds 4", 61x91cm, mixed media on board